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RODRIGUEZ Playing Deadhead for a day

CONTINUED FROM E2

Of course, you could not fully experience the Bay Area without seeing the Grateful Dead. The Dead's first Top 10 hit, Touch of Grey, was the song I heard when I entered my local 7-Eleven for the first time. Jaunty as hell, about aging gracefully: "Every silver lining's got a touch of grey ... I will get by, I will get by, I will get by-eye-eye-eye." So I asked to review them.

"What's the Dead's appeal?" I asked Mark Weinstein, manager of the amazingly huge and diverse Amoeba Records store. Wearing a wildly coloured shirt and psychedelic tie for the concert in 1968, he said he went annually as an anthropological event that values the crowd, which is more important than the music. "It's the most diverse crowd in rock. I mean, you see stockbrokers there just to let loose. There's a positive energy at Dead concerts. They're all there with one purpose only: to have a good time, without necessarily being New Age or like, say, Ramtha. If you get bored with the music, just look at the audience." Hmm.

I arrived at the Oakland Coliseum at 6, two hours before showtime, and the parking lot (called the Dead Zone) was quite the scene. Young people raising a finger, saying "cash for your extra" (like a mantra. Another: "I'll love you for a ticket." Everyone was finding their bliss, as heralded by popular meta-philosopher Joseph Campbell. I suddenly realized that some marijuana might enliven the show. I spied a guy in a conservative tie trading dope for tickets. He took cash, too. This was a geo-u-wine hippie bazaar, lined with old VW vans, a cross between Northern California and Marrakesh. Earth types flogging food: burritos, muffins (organic and/or spiked), health food and pizza. Selling acid, selling jewelry, beads, psychedelic baubles, pipes and chillums, selling battery-powered red, white and blue electric yo-yos, ponchos, carpets (magic and/or functional). The legalize-pot folks sold buttons and hemp bags, handing out documents.

Inside the Coliseum, pink signs announced: "QUEER DEADHEAD VISIBILITY. March in San Francisco's Gay Freedom Day Parade on June 2!! ... We're organizing a parade contingent of queer Deadheads, with the theme No Time to Hate."

A sign in the pisseir: "JUST SAY KNOW!! ... Operation DEAD END is a DEA codename for a surveillance and sting operation that is aimed at Deadheads at Dead shows. KNOW who you are dealing with — or don't deal! ... Be cool, alert, discreet + aware!"

As the music began — "the music plays the Dead" was the hype; they were reputed not to follow a set list — I took a couple of puffs ... and soon ... it seemed ... like I was the only person ... not standing. Everybody was loosening up to the music (first three words: "We can share ...") — with the most frantic dancers in the alcove at the exits, where they couldn't even see the Dead. Within minutes, I found myself laughing uproariously. I started taking notes — and soon I saw many Deadheads taking notes, in little books, journals, on matchbook covers, scraps of paper.

The Dead spell set in: couples hugged each other. The band had the technical aspects down to a metaphysical science: soft lights bathed the crowd, in hues of yellows, purples; the circular lasers were tasteful, the kaleidoscopic spots hellishly impressive. The sound quality was the best I'd heard in any arena — every word, every precious note so clear.

Ol' Jerry Garcia, 50, wore a grey T-shirt, black jogging sweats, and white and Day-Glo pink Nike running shoes. His hair and beard were perfectly silver, shaped just so, as if he could be stamped onto a commemorative coin. They all looked to be in great shape, after all those trips they'd taken.

The music was a blithe mix of country-rock and psychedelic jazz, with a homey feel to it. I took a couple more puffs and was into the mood. Garcia's first solo climbed deliberately slowly, as predictably unpredictable as the curling smoke from my joint.

But ... gradually ... it started to sink in ... like a stone ... that the mid-tempo shuffling was about all there was to this band. Garcia's solos existed in such suspended animation that they were almost inert. (But maybe that's the point, I rationalized.) Garcia and Bob Weir's vocals seemed like caricatures of their own limitations: they strained so hard to hit the right notes that they were virtually expressionless.

Intermission. A guy in a turban shouted: "Thou shalt not worship anything that's unchanging ... Copies of my tapes may be had from the Grateful Dead." I headed to the merchandise area. The Dead had the most ornate T-shirts in the biz (from $20 to $35), trippy designs with the familiar smiling skull and bones and roses (a cross between psychedelia and Disney). I bought the white Chinese New Year model, figuring it'd look good on a glowing uproariously. I started taking notes — and soon I saw many Deadheads taking notes, in little books, journals, on matchbook covers, scraps of paper.

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The music was a blithe mix of country-rock and psychedelic jazz, run us off before we got to where we really could go." Gratefully, the show ended with Knockin' on Heaven's Door.

I called publicist Dennis McNally (author of a Dead book): "They've never been healthier. Jerry's working out, watching his diet, working on his smoking. There's still a lot of untapped potential in this band ... the best potential since I've worked with the band over 14 years. I'm not being gushy — well, maybe I am, but it's sincere." He said they merchandise over 100 products, the newest being the Daily Trippet, a personal-planner computer program with drawings by Jerry. "But we're nickel-and-dime stuff compared to, say, the Rolling Stones," he claimed. "Their fans tend to see them once every three years or so, so they load up on merchandise. Our fans see us three, four times a year, so they'd rather save the money for tickets."

Regarding critics who went to Dead shows with preconceived notions — like, it's hip to trash the Dead: "A huge chunk of Grateful Dead reviews are written before the critic sees the show, (but) the band are actually much harder on themselves than any critic could be."

What did he think of the show? "The spirit was there, the audience was into it, but it wasn't a particularly good show. They hadn't played in a while. A-minus instead of A-plus."

Garcia died in 1995. A memorial concert took place at Golden Gate Park. I listened to the remaining Dead live on the radio.

I expanded my jazz listening in Berkeley, hanging out and schtitzing almost daily with Richard Brown at his funky, eponymous record store at the border of Oakland, where I switched to vinyl, including rare deep-groove originals. It was opposite the famed Yoshi's jazz club, where I saw Little Jimmy Scott — born with a condition that froze his physical development and gave him an unusually high voice — deliver the most riveting show I've experienced.

An interview with future OSM music director Kent Nagano, right (pictured in 2003), brought Juan Rodriguez's career full circle when talk turned to Nagano collaborator Frank Zappa, a formative influence for the critic.

A move to California's Bay Area necessitated an evening in the company of Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead — and their fans.

Portishead (led by Beth Gibbons) spurred a love of electronica.

Thanks to Kent Nagano conducting the Berkeley Symphony, I also got into classical music in a big way. (Who wouldda thunk?) Lithe, with high cheekbones and his trademark long black hair, he cut quite a figure. (He didn't just stride on stage — he marched briskly.) At post-concert receptions, changed into faded jeans, he engaged casually with season-ticket subscribers as if they were neighbours. One of the symphony's patrons, Karen Klaber, publisher of the Berkeley Monthly, introduced us and I wrote two lengthy portraits (for the Monthly and East Bay Express). In 1995, he invited Karen and me to the opening of the postmodern black Lyon opera house; designed to his specifications, it even included little lamps at each seat so listeners could follow the libretto.

Concerning classical music's place in a rock society, he said: "Things aren't helped by the fact that classical music organizations tend to portray themselves as extremely erudite and sort of above the normal. That's really unfortunate, because it is totally possible to find some part of classical music that you can relate to immediately. As a child you might not like caviar, prefer a Snickers bar instead. Gradually, as an adult, you learn to appreciate tastes in a different way. Not that you taste *harder*," he laughed.

"I'm not sure that an entertainment form can grow and mature in the way that listening to a Beethoven symphony can be a really maturing process, as you listen to it as a child, as a teenager, as a young adult and an older adult. You're having different experiences each time, because the music is sophisticated and complex enough that it speaks on several different layers at the same time." All that's required from the listener is to "become engaged" with the music.

I quickly became engaged with Nagano's renderings of the music of French composer Olivier Messiaen, with whom Nagano collaborated on several premieres. It sounded spacier and far more mysterious than, say, Pink Floyd.

Nagano first saw Frank Zappa perform on Johnny Carson's show, and was turned on by friends to his more complex works. In the early '80s, he noticed Zappa among Pierre Boulez's projects for the Ensemble InterContemporain in Paris, and contacted Uncle Frank. Zappa invited Nagano to an L.A. show and gave him some scores, later asking him to conduct the London Symphony Orchestra in a 1983 recording of his works. (He called several composers, conductors and symphonic players, asking if Nagano had the requisite talent.) The result was two albums, London Symphony Orchestra Vols. 1 and 2, that went a long way in pitting Zappa — and Nagano — on the contemporary-classical map.

When Zappa was dying of prostate cancer, in 1993, Nagano prefaced a performance of one of his works by phoning him. "What are you listening to these days?" he asked. Zappa: "Well, as you might imagine, Kent, I don't have a whole lot of time for recreational listening."

"The real Frank Zappa," Nagano told me, referencing his "outrageous" image, "is really serious, very uncompromising, meticulous, clear thought, and brilliant. Just a genius. That's not an understatement. He has a brilliant mind, brilliant sense of creativity that simply does not stop."

I would never have dreamed that years after I returned home in 1996, I would be interviewing Nagano in this city as he took the reins of the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal and, as he did in Lyon, pressed for a new maison symphonique.

In 1996, during intermission at a double bill in a Berkeley cinema, a girl asked me for a light — and wound up the evening by kissing me twice, passionately. Carina was an Argentine who drove her Saab super fast. We embarked on a glorious seven-week romance, the soundtrack of which was Portishead's first album, Dummy, which she said consoled her when she was recuperating from a broken leg. She drove me up winding mountain roads to the telescope at Mount Lick, then 'round midnight inched down that route, car lights off, with only the moon to guide us, while Portishead played spookily in the dead of night.

Needless to say, it became one of my all-time fave albums. It also spurred an interest in electronic pop — the rich soundscapes of Amon Tobin, the zany paste-up hip-hop pastiche of DJ Shadow, the heady angst of Radiohead, the poetic noise of Tim Hecker.

My fave new was Goldfrapp, a British band that has never gained much of a foothold in North America. Alternating between ethereal atmospherics and shimmering dance beats, it features the mysteriously sexy Alison Goldfrapp and enigmatic studio whiz Will Gregory. Their debut album, 2000's Felt Mountain, hooked me from the first weird, wired song, Lovely Head: "I fool myself to sleep and dream / Nobody's here / No one but me /So cool / You're hardly there / Why can't this be killing you / Frankenstein would want your mind / Your lovely head." Well, I guess you had to be there.

Sometime in the new millennium, Goldfrapp played the Spectrum. I stood for the entire show. I gazed at Alison, squeezed into a costume that revealed pale British cleavage and luscious legs in fishnet stockings, appearing vulnerable when she tripped over a wire.

Oh, Alison! Alison, I'm here! Just for you — and the futuristic sounds you represent! I found myself wading into the crowd, toward the stage, transfixed by her spoiled beauty ... electric sounds to match ... the unbelievable mystery ... of what ... I don't know ... the ephemeral power ... of organized sound ... a dream come true ...

Finally, I was a fan again.

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